

Mandarin *NewsLine*

January 2026 Volume 21 Issue 1

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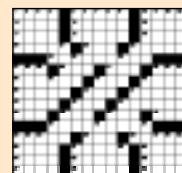
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BFF Best Furry Friend



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January:

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Classifieds



Photos courtesy Mandarin Community Club

A record-breaking crowd gathers under the historic oaks at the Mandarin Community Club for the sixth annual Christmas tree lighting on Dec. 6. The event featured the largest live-cut tree in Jacksonville and festive uplighting throughout the grounds.

Holiday magic at Community Club

By Brett Nolan

On Dec. 6, the historic Mandarin Community Club glowed brighter than ever as a record crowd of hundreds of families, the largest turnout in the event's six-year history, gathered for the sixth annual Christmas tree lighting.

This heartwarming celebration, proudly recognized as the biggest live-cut Christmas tree lighting in the entire city of Jacksonville and recipient of the 2024 Neighborhood Champion Award from the city of Jacksonville's Neighborhood Department, overflowed with pure holiday magic: laughter, festive music, the scent of fresh evergreen and a magical flurry of Florida snow the moment the switch was flipped.

Holiday cont. on pg. 2



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Seeds & Deeds

Mandarin Garden Club celebrates season of giving, announces 'Sprouts' registration

By Michele Alex

The Mandarin Garden Club finished last year in good spirits as members of all circles supported the local community with various generous donations.

This year, the Dogwood Circle's monetary collection was donated to the Divine Mercy House, while the Cherokee Rose Circle collected items for City Rescue Mission's Shoe Boxes of Love and Isaiah's House 117.

The Mandarin Food Bank received 125 pounds of fresh produce from the club's garden in addition to large amounts of nonperishable items donated by members, a tradition the club has maintained since 2008. Other organizations the club supported include the Ronald McDonald House, the Lions Club and Meals on Wheels.

It is winter now, but the club's grounds are still colorful, and the red, pink and white

Garden Club cont. on pg. 10



Duval County announces 2025 Teacher of the Year finalists



Photo courtesy Duval County Public Schools

By Sonya Duke-Bolden

Duval County Public Schools has announced the five outstanding educators selected as the 2025 Teacher of the Year finalists.

The finalists include Michelle Flores of Douglas Anderson School of the Arts; Monica Gold of Arlington Middle School; Valerie Pitts-Wilson

of Rutledge Pearson Elementary School; Dr. Mari Richardson of Jean Ribault High School; and Petika Tave of Reynolds Lane Elementary School.

Each of these educators is an exceptional representative of the excellence in teaching found across the district. The finalists, along with each school's individual Teacher of the Year, will

be recognized at the EDDY Awards on Saturday, Jan. 24, where the 2026 Team Duval Teacher of the Year will be selected.

Sonya Duke-Bolden is the Support Technician, Marketing and Public Relations, for Duval County Public Schools.

Holiday cont. from pg. 1

First Coast News anchor Jeannie Blaylock was the ceremonial tree lighter and brought the perfect touch of warmth and wonder. In her heartfelt remarks, Blaylock spoke about how truly special Christmas is and how the Mandarin community captures that spirit like no other place on the First Coast.

When she counted down and the switch was thrown, thousands of twinkling lights burst to life across the massive tree, Florida snow gently filled the air and the crowd erupted in cheers.

Capping it all was the stunning Mandarin orange tree topper, an illuminated work of art created by internationally renowned artist Brenda Mauney Councill, paying beautiful homage to the community's citrus heritage and historic roots.

The festive atmosphere was elevated all evening by outstanding live music from Smooth Vibes, who generously donated their time and talent once again, along with joyful Christmas carols performed by Theatre Troupe 1776 at the pavilion. Inside the beautifully decorated Community Club building, long lines of excited children and parents stretched out the door as families waited to meet Santa and whisper their Christmas wishes.

Thanks to the generosity of the community, this year's event collected more than 200 pounds of food for the Mandarin Food Bank, including multiple boxes of fresh citrus from their Florida Citrus Fundraiser. The club, in partnership with the Toys for Tots organization, also gathered two full boxes of toys, helping bring smiles to local children this holiday season.

None of this magic would have been possible without the incredible gen-

erosity of the sponsors, donors and volunteers who stepped up to make the night unforgettable. Stephen and Ashly with AVL Productions donated professional sound so every voice and note could be heard crystal clear, while also creating breathtaking uplighting that bathed the historic live oak trees in a warm, Christmas glow. Matt and the team at Arbor Tech 904 safely installed the gigantic tree, and Liberty Landscaping helped secure it.

Eric Gillis and the entire Mandarin Chick-fil-A family brought Santa's favorite cow and donated delicious sandwiches to help raise funds for the club. Smooth Vibes and Theatre Troupe 1776 filled the air with live holiday music and carols, while Pastor Devyn Nelson and Mandarin Presbyterian Church offered a heartfelt invocation to start the evening.

Additional support came from Mandarin Home Depot and Severt's Tree Lot at Mandarin Medical Center, who supplied beautiful holiday décor. The Mandarin Museum & Historical Society opened the 1911 Store and Post Office Museum so guests could step back in time, and Olis Garber and Keith Bartholomew captured every magical moment through their photography.

A tremendous thank you to every volunteer, every donor and every family who came out to celebrate the kickoff to the holiday season in Mandarin. Because of you, the sixth annual Mandarin Community Christmas tree lighting wasn't just an event — it was a shining reminder of why this historic community feels like home, especially at Christmas.

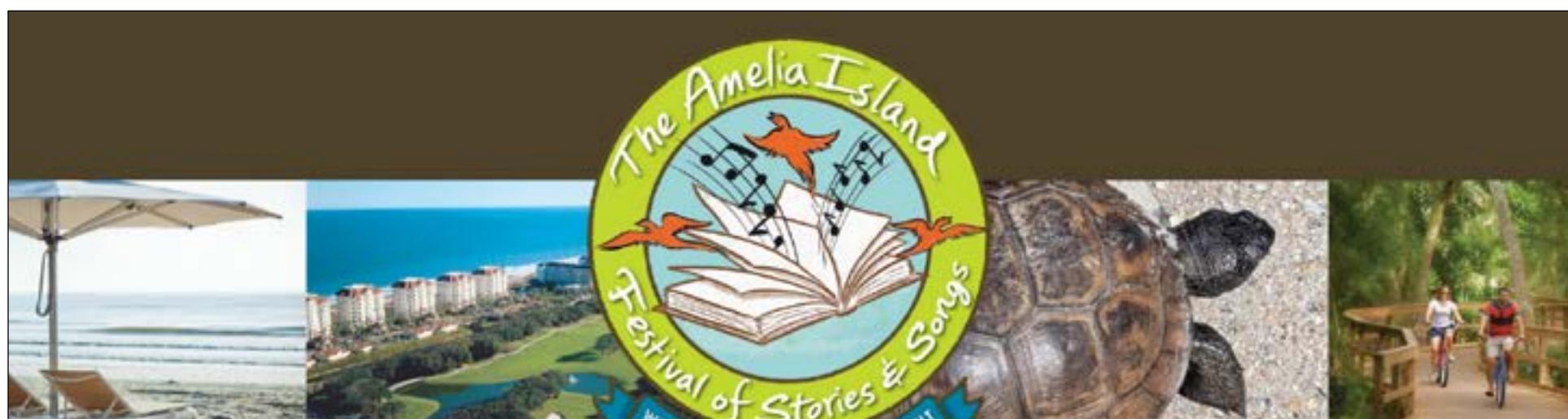
Enjoy the Mandarin Christmas tree, lit nightly through the new year.



Santa Claus visits with a young guest during the festivities. Families waited in line inside the historic club building to share their holiday wishes.



Live music filled the air during the celebration, which included performances by Smooth Vibes and carols by Theatre Troupe 1776.

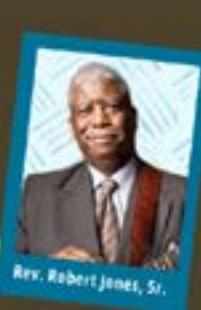


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January

Community Calendar What's Happening in Mandarin

To submit items for the Community Calendar, email editor@floridanewsline.com.

Jan. 6 Honeybee Quilters Guild

Honeybee Quilters Guild will meet Tuesday, Jan. 6, at 6:30 p.m. at Mandarin Church of Christ, 12791 Old St. Augustine Rd. Doors open at 6 p.m. Member Colleen Rosatone will provide the program. New members and guests welcome. Visit honeybeequilters.org for more information.

Jan. 6 GriefShare Grief Support Group

GriefShare Grief Support Group meets Tuesdays from 10 a.m. to noon starting Jan. 6 through April 7 at Cody Enrichment Center, 4152 Loretto Rd. At a GriefShare group, you'll find understanding, guidance, relief and a safe place to navigate the challenges of grief. For more information, call (904) 318-9308 or visit grief-share.org.

Jan. 8 American Legion Post 372 Mandarin "Fallen Heroes" meeting

The January meeting of the American Legion Post 372 Mandarin "Fallen Heroes" will be held Wednesday, Jan. 8, at 7 p.m. at Williams YMCA, 2nd floor, 10415 San Jose Blvd. For more information, visit alpost372fl.org.

Jan. 11 GriefShare Grief Support Group

GriefShare Grief Support Group meets Sundays from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m. starting Jan. 11 through April 12 at Cody Enrichment Center, 4152 Loretto Rd. At a GriefShare group, you'll find understanding, guidance, relief and a safe place to navigate

the challenges of grief. For more information, call (904) 318-9308 or visit [Griefshare.org](http://griefshare.org).

Jan. 15 Rethreaded - Complete restoration of survivors of human trafficking

Mandarin Garden Club General meeting will have a presentation at 10 a.m. Wednesday, Jan. 15, given by Lisa Kiral, business developer coordinator for Rethreaded. Public is invited to this free event. For more information visit mandaringardenclub.org.

Jan. 22 Mandarin Women's Club Welcomes JSO's Sgt. Richard Hendley

Mandarin Women's Club welcomes JSO's Sgt. Richard Hendley Wednesday, Jan. 22. Doors open at 10:30 a.m. at Ramada Inn Mandarin, 3130 Hartley Road. Reservations required by Jan. 12. Contact barbara.metallo@outlook.com or call (904) 612-6494.

Jan. 22 Mandarin Republican Club

The Mandarin Republican Club will meet Thursday, Jan. 22, at St. Mary's Seafood, 11290 Old St. Augustine Rd. Social time begins at 6 p.m., and the meeting starts at 6:30 p.m. The speaker will be mayoral candidate Ron Armstrong.

Jan. 22 "Lessons in Chemistry"

Mandarin Garden Club Live Oak circle will have their monthly meeting at 7 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 22, featuring Master Gardener Beth Marlowe with a talk about how and when to fertilize. Public is invited to this free event. For more information visit mandaringardenclub.org.

Jan. 26 Archaeological Institute of America - Jacksonville Society

The Archaeological Institute of America - Jacksonville Society will meet at 7 p.m. Monday, Jan. 26, at the UNF Adam Herbert University Center to participate in the UNF Manchin Lecture Series in Ancient Studies. The speaker will be David Gilman Romano. Parking is free. For more information, contact Melva Price at (904) 241-9411 or aiajaxswoc@gmail.com.

Ongoing Activities

Sprout - Science through Gardening

Sprout program, Science through Gardening is offered for home-schoolers ages 9 to 12. They meet at the Mandarin Garden Club on second and fourth Mondays of the month from 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. For more information or to register, contact katprov5@gmail.com or visit mandaringardenclub.org/sprouts.

Mandarin Parkinson's Support Group

Men and women of all ages and stages of Parkinson's are welcome. Group/Classes are free. A meeting place to do life together. Learn from one another and live out real life. Hear from speakers, play games, enjoy activities and more. Support group meets monthly on Sundays from 2 to 4 p.m. at Church of Eleven22, 4911 Losco Rd. For more information, contact Katheryn Donaldson at serving4_him@yahoo.com or (904) 710-1449.

Mandarin Parkinson's Exercise Classes

Exercise classes for those with Parkinson's meet Wednesdays from 6 to 7 p.m. at Christ Church, 6045 Greenland Rd., and Thursdays from

6 to 7 p.m. at FBC Church, 210 N. Ridgecrest Ln. Classes are free. For more information, contact Katheryn Donaldson at serving4_him@yahoo.com or (904) 710-1449.

Parkinson's Caregiver Group

Parkinson's Caregiver Group meets the fourth Saturday of the month from 10 a.m. to noon at 11480 Pine St. Group leader is MaryJane Fitzsimmons. For more information, contact fitzspjmj@comcast.net.

Little Readers

Storytime for infants and toddlers (ages birth to five) with stories, music and movement. Storytimes run from 2 to 2:30 p.m. on Mondays and 10:15 to 10:45 a.m. on Thursdays at South Mandarin Library. Or join us from 10:15 or 11 a.m. on Fridays at Mandarin Library. Visit jaxlibrary.org/events for more information.

Willows - A Local Social Group for Widows

A social group for widows of all ages to share conversation, fellowship and light refreshments. Meets on the second Tuesday of each month from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at First Christian Church, 11924 San Jose Blvd. Not a grief counseling group. RSVP to Ruth Saunders at (904) 401-3291 or FloridaSaunders974@gmail.com.

Toast of Jax Toastmasters

Toast of Jax Toastmasters meets every Saturday, except on holiday weekends, at 8:30 a.m. at Bahai Community Center, 5034 Greenland Road. Guests are welcome. The meetings can also be attended online at toastofjax.toastmastersclubs.org.

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Mandarin Women's Club welcomes JSO speaker for January luncheon



By Gail Packard

On Thursday, Jan. 22, the Mandarin Women's Club is pleased to welcome Jacksonville Sheriff's Office Sgt. Richard Hendley at its luncheon held at the Ramada Inn in Mandarin, 3130 Hartley Road.

Hendley will discuss ways to protect against identity theft and how to secure homes. He will also touch on other criminal activity. There will be a question-and-answer session after the presentation, so attendees should come prepared with questions about safety concerns.

Last month, members and spouses celebrated the holiday season with a gourmet dinner at HarborChase of Mandarin.

Doors open at 10:30 a.m. and reservations for the luncheon are required. The cost is \$25 and checks must be received by Monday, Jan. 12. To make reservations and obtain payment instructions, call Barbara at 904-612-6494 or email her at Barbara.metallo@outlook.com.

For more information on events, photos and membership forms, visit www.mandarinwomensclub.com.



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Library launches 2026 reading challenge

By Jeremy Yates

Spend more time reading in 2026. Jax Stacks, the library's year-round reading challenge for adults, is back for its fifth year.

As always, there are 16 challenge categories to choose from, including "A book read by a Library Book Club in 2026." Participants choose the 12 categories that interest them from the list and start reading books that fit those challenges.

Prizes are available for those who read 12 books by Dec. 31, 2026. Even if you aren't interested in a Jax Stacks mug or tote for yourself, the library branch with the most completed bookmarks gets bragging rights. Pick up a tracker bookmark and log your reading. Find challenge categories and rules at jaxlibrary.org/jaxstacks.

Looking for a reading challenge for kids? Mayor Deegan's River City Readers is an ongoing, citywide literacy challenge for school-aged children. To participate, download the free Beanstack app. For instructions on signing up or logging reading minutes, visit jacksonville.gov/rivercityreaders.

Families with infants or toddlers ages birth to 5 can also make friends and read great books through the Little Readers program. The sessions include stories, music and movement. Storytimes run weekly from 2 to 2:30 p.m. on Mondays and 10:15 to 10:45 a.m.



Photo courtesy Jacksonville Public Library

Thursdays at South Mandarin Library. Alternatively, visitors can attend at 10:15 or 11 a.m. on Fridays at the Mandarin Library.

For older kids, writer and illustrator Mi-

chael Regina will visit the South Mandarin Library at 11 a.m. on Saturday, Jan. 10, to chat about his new graphic novel, "Deepwater Creek." A limited number of copies will be given away to registered attendees ages 5 to 12. Sign up at jaxlibrary.org/litchat.

Youth ages 9 and older are invited to join in at 4 p.m. Mondays at the Mandarin Library for fun with games, movies and books. Coming up this month are activities inspired by "Artemis Fowl" on Jan. 5, "Sonic the Hedgehog" on Jan. 12 and "Naruto" on Jan. 26.

Those interested in technology can explore the latest tech and complete fun challenges during "Turn Up for Tech" from 4 to 5 p.m. on Thursday, Jan. 8, at South Mandarin Library. Attendees can drop in and interact with everything from robots to circuits, animation and coding.

Please note that all Jacksonville Public Library locations will be closed on Monday, Jan. 19, for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. Add these activities and more to your calendar at jaxlibrary.org/events.



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City Council approves workforce funding, Boylan updates Mandarin projects

Tracy McCormick-Dishman
editor@floridanewsline.com

The Jacksonville City Council wrapped up its final meeting of 2025 on Dec. 9 with a relatively light agenda that included the passage of a significant appropriation bill focused on workforce development and higher education, said District 6 Council Member Michael Boylan in a recent release.

Ordinance 2025-0781 appropriates \$15 million to various educational and trade organizations. The funding is drawn from savings in various department accounts, the council's contingency account and \$3 million from the Tourist Development Council.

Key allocations include \$6 million to the University of North Florida for capital repairs to Hodges Stadium and the construction of additional grass practice fields. The upgrades are intended to allow UNF to market the facility for regional and national events. Additionally, \$5 million was allocated to Florida State College at Jacksonville to purchase a building at Cecil Commerce Center for a skilled construction and logistics training institute.

Other beneficiaries include the Northeast Florida Builders Association (\$1 million), Edward Waters University (\$2 million), Workforce Industrial Training (\$325,000) and the Jacksonville General Apprenticeship Association (\$675,000).

"Please appreciate this bill was thoroughly vetted and modified as it went through various committees and even then... two floor amendments on the night of Council," said Boylan in the recent release.

Boylan noted that while he supported the workforce development projects, the complexity of the legislation presented challenges.

"A lesson learned by this experience was that such omnibus appropriation bills should and will be discouraged," Boylan said. "While many of us actively supported the workforce development projects, getting this bill done in a timely manner was difficult what with so many components to it."

Mandarin Road and zoning updates Locally, progress continues on the

Mandarin Road pedestrian safety improvements. The city's portion of the project is underway with an anticipated completion date of April 2026.

"For those who regularly traverse Mandarin Road just north of Loretto, your patience is appreciated," Boylan said. "As of this morning it looks as if they are nearing the completion of the sewage lines."

Boylan also addressed a recent construction permit issued for a Valvoline Instant Oil Change facility at the southeast corner of San Jose Boulevard and Kori Road. Residents often inquire about the proliferation of similar businesses along the corridor.

According to the Planning Department, the property is zoned CCG-2 (Commercial Community/General-2), which allows for automotive repair by right.

"You are correct this business on the property did not have to seek any type of zoning application for the use as it was allowed by right," Boylan explained regarding the planning response.

He noted that the City Council's role is limited in these instances.

"While I know full well we have a wealth of such services... along this corridor, the only instance when the council plays a role as to the nature of the business is when it involves the sale or consumption of alcohol on the premises," Boylan said. "Too many of 'this or that' simply is not a criterion when it comes to zoning or rezoning. It is for the market to decide."

Holiday recess

The City Council is currently on recess for the holidays. Standing committee meetings will resume the week of Jan. 5, 2026, with the next City Council meeting scheduled for Jan. 13.

Boylan also recapped recent holiday community service, noting that he and fellow council members served lunch at the Sulzbacher Center on Dec. 10, 2025.

Contact Council Member Boylan at MBoylan@coj.net or (904) 255-5206.



Photos courtesy Michael Boylan

District 6 Council Member Michael Boylan serves lunch to guests at the Sulzbacher Center on Dec. 10, 2025.



Council Member Michael Boylan (left) speaks with staff and volunteers while serving holiday meals at the Sulzbacher Center.

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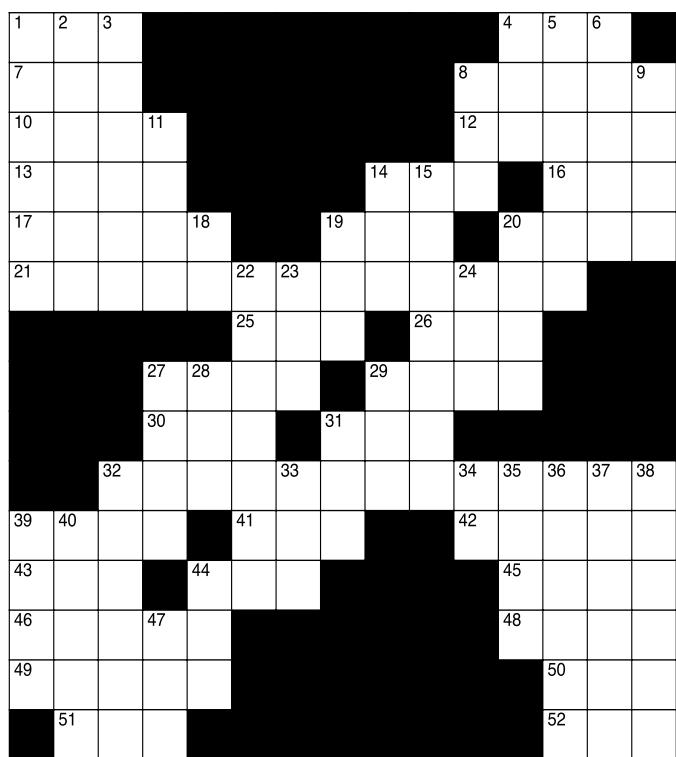
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Puzzles

Answers on page 3
Provided by MetroCreative



CLUES ACROSS

- Former CIA
- Language
- Constrictor snake
- Demand
- Rich man
- Short-tailed marten
- Zoroastrian concept of holy fire
- Superconducting super collider
- International group of countries within the Americas
- Sacred state for Muslims
- Shock therapy
- Engrave
- Localities
- Paddle
- Periodical
- Dishonestly gained money
- Gain possession of
- Actor DiCaprio
- High schoolers' test
- Mr. October
- Sign of healing
- One's grandmother
- Entrap
- One who simultaneously buys and sells
- Francisco
- Web-based data provider of marin life
- Type of snake
- Dark mark or stain
- Member of the Salii
- Former measure of length
- CNN's founder
- Witness

CLUES DOWN

- Acquire
- Console
- Hunting expedition
- Pie ___ mode
- Simple shoes for peasants
- Eurasian shrub
- Reciprocal of a sine
- Work together in harmony
- Grenade
- File extension
- Minute pores in a plant
- Medal of Honor
- Make a mistake
- Advance slowly, as if by inches
- Sandwich meat
- An awkward stupid person
- Strong tree
- Commoner
- Electroencephalograph
- Mahal
- Congressman
- Disorderly crowd
- 007's creator Fleming
- Atomic #55
- Part of a door
- Short-tail martens
- Baltimore ballplayer
- Cuddle
- Gang in "The Outsiders"
- Of Croatia
- Body cavity
- Get free of

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Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.



Solve the code to discover words related to the new year.
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(Hint: 21 = O)

A. 24 11 8 21 23 22 4 13 21 16
Clue: Made on January 1

B. 20 24 21 2 13 8 11
Clue: Pledge

C. 25 11 3 23 4 25 17
Clue: Good for you

D. 15 21 3 23
Clue: Objective

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Greenland Pines Elementary earns Blue Zones approval

By Sonya Duke-Bolden

Greenland Pines Elementary School has officially become the 11th Duval County Public School to earn Blue Zones approval, bringing the total number of recognized sites in the district to 12.

Thanks to the dedication of wellness ambassador and physical education

teacher Charles Schoonmaker, along with the leadership of Principal Michelle Hinkley, the school partnered closely with Blue Zones Project Jacksonville to implement health-focused changes.

The achievement underscores the school's commitment to promoting employee and student wellness through initiatives that encourage movement,

mindful eating, stress reduction and social connection.

Greenland Pines joins the following approved worksites and schools: DCPS District Office, Normandy Village Elementary, R. L. Brown Gifted and Talented Academy, Edward H. White High School, Gregory Drive Elementary, Springfield Middle, Mattie V. Ruth-

erford Alternative Middle School, Jean Ribault Middle School, Jean Ribault High School, Northwestern Legends Elementary School and Rutledge H. Pearson Elementary School.

Sonya Duke-Bolden is the Support Technician, Marketing and Public Relations, for Duval County Public Schools.

AIA Jacksonville Society to host lecture on ancient Greek sanctuaries

By Mike Napper

The Archaeological Institute of America - Jacksonville Society will meet at 7 p.m. Monday, Jan. 26, to participate in the University of North Florida (UNF) Manchin Lecture Series in Ancient Studies.

The speaker will be David Gilman Romano, a professor of Greek archaeology at the University of Arizona. His lecture is titled "The Sanctuary of Zeus and Sanctuary of Pan at Mount Lykaion."

Recent research at Mount Lykaion, both at the Sanctuary of Zeus on the southern summit of the mountain and at



David Gilman Romano

the Sanctuary of Pan in the lower mountain meadow, is leading to new understandings about cult practices at this ancient site in Greece.

This event will take place in the UNF Adam Herbert University Center,

where parking is free. A table will be set up at the door to provide information about the AIA group.

For more information, contact Melva Price at 904-241-9411 or aiajaxswoc@gmail.com.

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"Sprouts" participants engage in science-based learning activities. The program is designed for homeschooling children ages 9 to 12.

Garden Club cont. from pg. 1

gardenia bed welcomes visitors as they stroll in the garden.

With spring in mind, registration opens Jan. 2 for "Sprouts." This is a "science through gardening" club for homeschooling children ages 9 to 12. The educational program helps fulfill the club's mission to cultivate an appreciation and knowledge of gardening among the youth in the community.

Sessions are offered at the Mandarin Garden Club, 2892 Loretto Road, every second and fourth Monday from 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. The program runs from January through April 2026, and the cost is \$35.

For more information or to register for the program, contact katprov5@gmail.com or visit www.mandaringardenclub.org.

*In loving
memory of...*



Nardine Ann Koester

who passed away peacefully in Baptist South Hospice on November 24, 2025, at the age of 90 years old. She was born in Michigan and lived in Ohio, New York, West Virginia and for the last 40 years in Jacksonville, Florida - Mandarin area. Her health declined over the past three years, and despite our best efforts here, she is now well again in her eternal life with God in Heaven. Her husband George, daughter Kimberly (Kim), son-in-law William (Bill), and their family dog Zippy will hold her memory close to their hearts. She was a wonderful wife, mother, friend, joyful, loving and caring person. Throughout her life, she enjoyed family gatherings, cooking, golf, bowling, singing, gardening, Women's Clubs (helping her community) and attending Church and helping where she could.

A Celebration of Life will be held in The Chapel at Church of Our Saviour on February 7, 2026, at 11:00 AM with reception to follow.

Her final resting place will be at The Church of Our Saviour Columbarium. All that wish to attend are welcome. The obituary is available on the Hardage Giddens website for those who wish to light a candle or share a memory.

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Mandarin Middle students collect items for local food bank



Photo courtesy Mandarin Middle School
Members and officers of the Mandarin Middle School National Junior Honor Society pose with some of the more than 500 food items collected for the Mandarin Food Bank. The drive was a joint effort between the NJHS and the school's Career and Technical Education program.

By Jennifer Litchfield

Students at Mandarin Middle School recently concluded a holiday food drive to support local families in need.

The collection effort was organized through a partnership between the school's National Junior Honor Society (NJHS) and the Career and Technical Education (CTE) program. Through the initiative, students gathered and

donated more than 500 nonperishable food items.

The donations were delivered to the Mandarin Food Bank to assist with holiday distribution.

Jennifer Litchfield is the Gifted Lead, GATE 8th grade, Advanced World History, Student Activities Coordinator, NJHS Advisor and Ignite Mentor Program Advisor at Mandarin Middle School.

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